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SUBJECT: TAIWAN MINISTER OF EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL  
REFORM IN TAIWAN

Classified By: DIRECTOR DOUGLAS H. PAAL, REASONS 1.4 (B/D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: THE CURRENT MINISTER OF EDUCATION TU SHENG-CHENG IS CURRENTLY VISITING THE U.S. AND PLANS TO MEET THE U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION NEXT WEEK. FOLLOWING IS A DESCRIPTION OF THIS CONTROVERSIAL MINISTER AND SOME OF THE DIFFICULT ISSUES HE HAS FACED, INCLUDING A PROGRAM OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND INITIATIVES THAT HAD BEEN PASSED DOWN BY HIS PREDECESSORS IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROGRESSIVE PARTY (DPP). UNIVERSALLY REGARDED AS A BRILLIANT SCHOLAR, AND WITH SOLID SUPPORT IN THE LEGISLATIVE YUAN, MINISTER TU HAS NEVERTHELESS RECEIVED HARSH CRITICISM FOR THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF TAIWAN'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. END SUMMARY.

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TU SHENG-CHENG,S EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND  
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2. (U) TU HAS BEEN IN OFFICE SINCE 2004, WHEN PRESIDENT CHEN SHUI-BIAN,S SECOND TERM BEGAN. HE COMES FROM A DISTINGUISHED EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND HAS HELD KEY POSITIONS IN SEVERAL OF TAIWAN,S TOP ACADEMIC AND SCHOLARLY INSTITUTIONS. TU STUDIED AT THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SCIENCES AND HOLDS A MASTERS DEGREE IN HISTORY FROM NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY. FROM 1984 UNTIL PRESENT HE HAS BEEN A RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND PHILOLOGY AT ACADEMIA SINICA, TAIWAN,S LEADING ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH INSTITUTION. PRIOR TO JOINING ACADEMIA SINICA, TU WAS A VISITING SCHOLAR AT THE HARVARD-YENCHING INSTITUTE FROM 1983 TO 1984. AFTER RETURNING TO TAIWAN TU ALSO SERVED AS DIRECTOR OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF HISTORY AT NATIONAL TSING-HUA UNIVERSITY FROM 1986 TO 1987 AND THEN SERVED AS

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CHAIRMAN OF THE ANTHROPOLOGY GROUP IN TAIWAN FROM 1987 TO 1993. TU SERVED AS A MEMBER OF THE ACADEMIC REVIEWAL AND EVALUATION GROUP OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION FROM 1989 TO 1992. IN 1992 TU RETURNED TO THE UK AS A VISITING SCHOLAR AT THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON. HE THEN RETURNED TO TAIWAN,S MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND BECAME AN ACADEMIC ADVISOR TO THE MINISTRY FROM 1994 TO 1995. IN 1995, TU BECAME THE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF HISTORY AND PHILOLOGY AT ACADEMIA SINICA, AND STAYED IN THIS POSITION FROM 1995 TO 2000. FOLLOWING HIS ASSIGNMENT TO ACADEMIA SINICA HE WAS NAMED DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM AND SERVED THERE FROM 2000 TO 2004.

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EDUCATIONAL REFORM POLICY: GOALS OF THE PAST  
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3. (U) TAIWAN HAS UNDERGONE DRAMATIC EDUCATIONAL REFORMS OVER THE PAST 13 TO 14 YEARS. IN 1991 FORMER TAIWAN PRESIDENT LEE TENG-HUI FIRST INITIATED A REVIEW OF PROGRAMS TO REFORM THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA, A SYSTEM INSTALLED IN TAIWAN BY THE KUOMINTANG (KMT) FOLLOWING THE POST-1949 EXODUS. THE ORIGINAL INTENT OF THE LEE ADMINISTRATION WAS TO STREAMLINE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR TAIWAN BY MINIMIZING THE AMOUNT OF ROTE MEMORIZATION REQUIRED BY STUDENTS, ESSENTIALLY MAKING ELEMENTARY EDUCATION SIMPLER AND MORE COMPARABLE TO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM OF THE UNITED STATES. ONE OF THE PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED WITH TAIWAN,S ELEMENTARY EDUCATION WAS THE AMOUNT OF TIME NEEDED FOR STUDENTS TO STUDY IN ORDER TO BE COMPETITIVE FOR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. THE HIGH LEVEL OF COMPETITION STILL CREATES A NEED FOR STUDENTS TO DEVOTE TIME OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM TO ATTEND &CRAM8 SCHOOL CLASSES, WHICH IN TURN CREATES AN ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL BURDEN, PARTICULARLY FOR PARENTS OF LOWER INCOMES. CRITICS SAY THAT TAIWAN,S CURRENT ELEMENTARY EDUCATION SYSTEM ESSENTIALLY PUTS CHILDREN WHO COME FROM WEAKER ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS AT A DISADVANTAGE. THE LEE INITIATIVE ALSO CALLED FOR AN INCREASED LEVEL OF COMPETITIVENESS IN TAIWAN'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM, WHICH WOULD REQUIRE GREATER ALLOCATION OF FUNDS TO TOP RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS AND LABORATORIES THROUGHOUT THE ISLAND.

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EDUCATION REFORM POLICY RESULTS AND SHORTCOMINGS  
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4. (C) INSTEAD OF PRODUCING MORE COMPETITIVE STUDENTS,

OBSERVERS AGREE THAT THE OVERALL QUALITY OF GRADUATES FROM TAIWANESE UNIVERSITIES OR COLLEGES HAS DROPPED NOTICEABLY IN RECENT YEARS. THIS IS LARGELY IN RESPONSE TO THE INCREASING NUMBER OF ESTABLISHMENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION. SEVERAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT CONTEND THAT THE CREATION OF NEW UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES AND DISTRIBUTION OF LIMITED RESOURCES TO THEM THROUGHOUT TAIWAN SIMPLY DILUTES OVERALL COMPETITIVENESS OF TAIWANESE GRADUATING CLASSES, THUS MAKING IT DIFFICULT FOR COMPANIES TO FIND COMPETENT EMPLOYEES. SOME SUGGEST THAT A CONSOLIDATION OF UNIVERSITIES IS NECESSARY TO MAKE THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS MORE COMPETITIVE. IN ADDITION, BY HAVING FEWER UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES TO FUND, THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT WOULD BE ABLE TO DEDICATE MORE FUNDING TO PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITIES FOR THE PURPOSE OF ESTABLISHING HIGH QUALITY RESEARCH FACILITIES AND LABS THAT ARE MORE COMPARABLE TO MANY OF THE HIGH RANKING INSTITUTIONS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

15. (C) EDUCATION CURRICULUM HAS BECOME A POLARIZED ISSUE FOR POLITICIANS. THE CURRENT RULING PARTY, UNDER MINISTER OF EDUCATION TU, HAS STRIVEN TO REVISE THE HISTORY TEXTBOOKS TO A MORE TAIWAN-ORIENTED EMPHASIS, WHEREAS, IN THE PAST THE HISTORY TEXTBOOKS WERE DOMINATED BY CHINESE HISTORY IMPORTED BY THE KMT FROM THE MAINLAND. THE REVISIONS HAVE CREATED MIXED EMOTIONS IN TAIWANESE SOCIETY. STUDENTS OF PARENTS THAT VOTE PREDOMINANTLY KMT AND HAVE A MORE RECENT HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION FROM THE MAINLAND FEEL A SENSE OF ANIMOSITY IN SOCIETY. THESE PARENTS OFTEN WONDER WHAT THE RELEVANCE OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IS TO THE EDUCATION OF THEIR CHILDREN. LIKEWISE, STUDENTS OF PARENTS SYMPATHETIC TO THE DPP ARE MORE LIKELY TO SIDE WITH THE EDUCATIONAL REFORMS. THESE REFORMS CAN BE PERCEIVED AS AN INDIGENIZATION OF THE TAIWANESE EDUCATION SYSTEM. INSTEAD OF SIMPLIFYING THE SYSTEM, AS INTENDED, STUDENTS ARE FINDING INCREASING AMOUNTS OF CURRICULUM TO STUDY AND MEMORIZE TO PREPARE FOR ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS. THE RULING PARTY HAS AND WILL CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE THE REVISION PROCESS OF TEXTBOOKS TO INFLUENCE FUTURE VOTERS AND YOUNG CITIZENS. THIS LACK OF STABILITY MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR TAIWANESE YOUTH TO FIND DIRECTION AND PREDICTABILITY THROUGH EDUCATION, AS IT APPEARS TO BE VAGUELY DEFINED AND IN A STATE OF CONSTANT REVISION.

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MINISTER TU AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM  
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16. (C) THE POSITION OF MINISTER OF EDUCATION IN TAIWAN ATTRACTS A VAST AMOUNT OF PRESSURE FROM ALL SIDES OF TAIWAN SOCIETY. THE REFORMS FOR WHICH MINISTER TU IS CURRENTLY BEING CRITICIZED WERE FIRST INTRODUCED BY THE CHEN ADMINISTRATION'S FIRST MINISTER OF EDUCATION, OVID TZENG. HOWEVER, MANY OF THE POLICIES WERE NOT FULLY OR EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED AND NEED TO BE RESOLVED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO SALVAGE THE FUTURE OF TAIWANESE EDUCATION. TU HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF BEING A BAD ADMINISTRATOR, FOR MAKING DECISIONS BASED ON POLITICS RATHER THAN EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES, AND FOR "OVER-INDIGENIZING" THE CURRICULUM. THE CRITICISM COMES FROM ALL CORNERS: PEOPLE WITH RECENT CHINESE ANCESTRY OPPOSE TU FOR INTRODUCING TOO MUCH LOCALIZATION TO THE CURRICULUM, WHILE THOSE OF LOCAL DESCENT EQUALLY COMPLAIN THAT HE HAS BROADENED AND THEREFORE COMPLICATED THE CURRICULUM. EVERYONE SEEMS UNHAPPY WITH THE STATE OF CONSTANT FLUX AND UNPREDICTABILITY.

17. (C) COMMENT: LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN TAIWAN, THE ISSUE OF REFORM OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM HAS BECOME HIGHLY POLITICIZED. WHILE MINISTER TU IS INARGUABLY A CONTROVERSIAL MINISTER OF EDUCATION AND HAS CLEARLY NOT MANAGED THE REFORM PROCESS TO EVERYONE'S SATISFACTION, THE FACT IS THAT HIS IS A PORTFOLIO THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF MUCH CRITICISM. WHILE MANY OF TU'S PREDECESSOR'S WERE PREMATURELY REMOVED FROM THEIR POSITIONS, TU MAINTAINS STRONG SUPPORT FROM HIS PARTY AND THERE IS NO SERIOUS TALK OF HIS REMOVAL. THE CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING HIM AND EDUCATION REFORM IN TAIWAN MAY BE TAKEN AS A COMMENT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN THIS SOCIETY AND THE PUBLIC'S RECOGNITION THAT SOMETHING MUST BE DONE. END COMMENT.  
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